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AUTHOR Garbarino, Maureen
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ABSTRACT

Before an effective program can be developed to help the remedial writing student, instructors must dispel the myth that college students can read college level materials. Related to this assumption is the belief that those who cannot read in college cannot do so because of a lack of intelligence. Clearly what is important in understanding the connection between reading and writing difficulties is simply the recognition that many students are, in fact, poor readers and that this deficiency may be the basis for many of the problems a student is having, not only in writing classes but in other classes as well. Teachers forget that, because there is no necessary connection between reading ability and intelligence or speaking ability, poor readers may be orally fluent and, in fact, may be better at remembering material presented to them orally. Teachers also forget that there are important differences between written and spoken language that may allow students' facility with oral language to conceal their deficiencies in reading and writing. Since much of the recent research seems to suggest a link between writing and reading deficiencies, it would be useful for writing teachers to know more about the testing of reading, about reading theory generally, and about ways to integrate reading and writing in the classroom. (HOD)

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READING DEFICIENCIES: STUMBLING BLOCKS TO PROGRESS IN WRITING?

MAUREEN GARBARINO

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON ENGLISH IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE (BEND, OREGON, OCT. 30 - NOV. 1, 1980)

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READING DEFICIENCIES: STUMBLING BLOCKS TO
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One of the problems with discussing deficiencies in reading ability is that the term "reading" is used to cover such a wide range of activities, from the minimal ability to distinguish between one letter and another, to the most sophisticated analysis of literature. No doubt there is such a continuum in the reading process. However, failure to distinguish between the various parts of the continuum has caused the cerebral processing of information to be confused with the further analysis of that information once received. In order to discuss most effectively that part of the reading process which, I believe, has a bearing on writing deficiencies, I propose to limit my definition of "reading" to a middle ground, beginning at the point where the deciphering of blocks of print acquires meaning and ending where the interpretation of meaning begins. Arbitrary and unnatural as this limitation may seem, I believe it will prove useful in trying to understand some of the connections between deficiencies in reading and writing.

By "reading," then, I mean the process by which the brain attaches meaning to the printed page, processes, and stores it. I assume for the purposes of this discussion that the reader has a basic understanding of the currently accepted model of memory processing. If not, I refer the reader to Frank Smith's explanation of "sensory store," "short-term" and "long-term" memory in Chapter 4 of Understanding Reading or to George Miller's article,

"The Magic Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on our Capacity for Processing Information."

In particular, I am concerned with what the implications of a connection between reading and writing skills may be for the remedial writing student and for the remedial writing teacher at the post-secondary level.

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What are some of the "myths" about reading that need to be dispelled before an effective program can be developed to help the remedial writing student?

Certainly the first "myth" is simply the tacit assumption of many instructors that college students can read at more-or-less college level. Many instructors, not merely those in English departments, assume that students have the ability to get from their texts or other reading material the information necessary to participate adequately in class discussions or examinations. Perhaps at one time, ten or fifteen years ago, this was a valid assumption. Given present open-door policy and the rise in numbers of non-traditional students entering college, however, it is no longer tenable. Nevertheless, many instructors are still conducting classes on this premise, and few have taken the time to test either the reading ability of their students or the readability level of their texts.

Probably related in origin to this assumption about the reading levels of students is the belief that those who cannot read at college level cannot do so because of a basic lack of intelligence. Though the fallacy of this assumption has been proven by considerable research, the myth has certainly not been eradicated from the minds of many college faculty. If asked at a conscious level whether they really believe that students with reading

deficiencies are unintelligent, they might deny it. Yet they act as if it were true. This attitude can be seen in the reluctance of many faculty and administrators to provide facilities for remedial reading and writing instruction, learning assistance programs, and tutorial centers. Instead, the responsibility for these programs is often relegated to the high schools, adult education programs, or vocational institutes. In other words, the attitude of many college and university faculty is that "remedial students do not belong in college" because they simply "cannot be helped." Obviously anyone who begins from such a premise is not going to do much to help the remedial student or even the ordinary student who would benefit from a "developmental" reading program.

What are some of the things we need to know in order to understand the connection between reading and writing difficulties?

Clearly, what is most important in understanding the connection between reading and writing difficulties is simply the recognition that many of our students are, in fact, poor readers and that this deficiency may be the basis for many of the problems a student is having, not only in writing classes but in other classes as well. If diagnostic reading tests were more readily available or commonly used for college students, the extent of the problem would be more commonly known. As it is, we may only be seeing the result of students' reading problems in their inability to write well and are surprised because they are often so fluent verbally. We forget that, because there is no necessary connection between reading ability and intelligence or speaking ability, poor readers may be orally fluent and, in fact, may be better at remembering material presented to them orally (such as in

lectures). We are also forgetting that there are important differences between written and spoken language which may allow our students' facility with oral language to conceal from us their deficiencies in reading and writing.

Mina Shaughnessy (Errors and Expectations) indicates repeatedly that the difference between speaking and writing is one of the primary causes of problems for students. Students who have no trouble remembering things they have heard or watched, she says, "may have short memory spans for written sentences simply because they have not read or written enough to develop that kind of memory" (p. 80). Part of the problem is simply that speech is, if not "primary," certainly easier and more "natural." As Shaughnessy says, "When the writer moves from spoken to written discourse, he faces a formidable task of synthesis" (p. 84). Written and spoken discourse often serve different purposes, since much of spoken language involves the give-and-take of practical communication whereas the written language used to describe, compare, contrast, analyze, persuade, etc. is often more complex. Each also has structural features which suit its particular purposes. Written language, lacking the modifying character of situation, expression, tone, and gesture, needs more precise and complex syntactic structures to convey its meaning. One need only read the transcription of an oral conversation to realize the incapacity of oral language to communicate effectively in written form. Given these basic differences between speaking and writing, it is not difficult to see why oral fluency does not guarantee written fluency.

Related to the differences between writing and speaking are the differences between the spoken language of educated, fluent readers and that of non-fluent readers, especially users of dialects or forms other than standard English. As

Shaughnessy points out, although the differences between spoken and written language exist even for the "standard speaker," they are "exaggerated when the writer's own speech is non-standard" (p. 51). Users of non-standard forms of oral English, however, seem to have less difficulty with writing if they have had enough experience reading standard written English. Also, it seems that people who have had considerable exposure to standard written English are frequently those whose oral forms of language most closely resemble standard written forms. It would seem that the speech of highly literate people is affected by exposure to written forms in such a way that it takes on many of the syntactical and other structural aspects of written discourse. This means that the remedial writer who is also a remedial reader is not particularly helped by whatever oral fluency he has since he needs skill in using a somewhat different syntactical system and set of directional cues ("now," "however," "whereas," etc.) than he uses for speaking.

If there are significant differences between the encoding processes of speaking and writing, there are also important differences between the encoding process of writing and the decoding process of reading. They are often referred to as "complementary" or "two sides of the same coin," and while this may be true from a certain point of view, it is useful to make some distinctions between them.

First of all, writing is more difficult than reading. We can grasp an idea and begin to understand it long before we can express or explain it to someone else, though periodic attempts to explain, either verbally or in writing, a difficult concept with which we are grappling may aid integration of the concept into what Frank Smith would call our "world view." When students say they "blew a test" even though they "knew" the material, they

may be right. They knew it well enough to have a subjective grasp of the ideas but not well enough to xpress them clearly. The student who responds orally and who takes notes on reading and class discussions may be a better student because he practices the encoding of information and thereby "makes it his own."

Moreover, as Frank Smith points out, there is the simple fact that we need more information to write than to read. A fluent reader who is reading for meaning picks up lexical, syntactic, and semantic cues from the piece of writing in front of him. He does not need to see the whole word, for example, to read ~~H~~o~~r~~s~~e~~. However, when he wants to write that word he must know each letter in order to reproduce it correctly. The reader may be able to guess a word from its context when reading without seeing the word at all, whereas in writing he must reproduce all the words. It would also seem likely, then, that it is more difficult to reproduce not only words but also syntax in writing than it is to see it in reading. Furthermore, if a student is a "word-by-word reader" (reading below 200 words per minute), he is simply not seeing the syntax he needs to reproduce in writing. And if written syntax is different and more complex than oral, then oral fluency will not be much help to the remedial writer.

One of the difficulties in exploring this particular area is that, although much has been written about connections between reading and writing, little has been said about the importance of syntax transference from reading to writing. Chomsky's statement that "Syntax is the bridge between surface and deep structure" places syntax as the connection between surface structure and meaning, but Chomsky was primarily concerned with spoken language, not with connections between reading and writing. Mina Shaughnessy, although she

points out many of the syntactic difficulties of her students and relates them to difference between written and spoken language, suggests that the best solution is more writing(see p. 87). She hardly mentions reading deficiencies or how reading improvement might affect writing. Frank Smith talks primarily about reading and has excellent chapters on letter and word identification (in Understanding Reading) but doesn't really explain the importance of syntax in the process of discovering or reproducing meaning. Cooper and Petrosky ("A Psycholinguistic View of the Fluent Reading Process") discuss ways in which syntactic cues are used in feature analysis without mentioning that a sort of "feature analysis" is at work in identifying syntax and that this process is part of what needs to be carried over from continued exposure to written discourse when the student begins to write. Marilyn Sternglass' article, "Creating the Memory of Unheard Sentences," suggests sequenced activities for improving the student's processing of phrases and clauses in larger "chunks" but does not sufficiently emphasize the function of improved reading skills in aiding this "chunking" capacity.

In fact, E.D. Hirsch's quote from Johnson-Laird ("The Perception and Memory of Sentences") would seem to deny altogether that there is a transference of syntactic constructs from reading to writing:

> All forms of syntactic structure are normally lost to memory within a few seconds.... No one knows how meaning is represented within memory, but there is no evidence to show that any form of syntactic structure is directly involved. (The Philosophy of Composition, pp. 122-3)

T.G. Bever ("Perception, Thought and Language") says that "after each clause is processed, it is recorded into a relatively abstract form, thereby leaving short-term memory available for processing the next clause" (from Hirsch, p. 120).

It seems to me, however, that even though the meaning of a particular phrase or clause may not enter long-term memory with its particular word

relationships intact, the "slots" of syntactic sequence do remain. Otherwise, as Chomsky pointed out, we would not have the ability to produce sentences we have neither heard nor read. Perhaps what reading does is to supply the grammatical data on which a reader can generalize rules about the syntax of written discourse just as listening provides the child with data for rules about oral discourse.

One could conclude from this that the development of writing skills is dependent upon the development of reading skills. If, when the student reads, he is not efficiently processing the phrase and clause clusters which are the essential units of meaning, he will not have the syntactic "tools" he needs to be an effective writer. If syntax is the bridge between surface structure (either sounds or marks on a page) and deep structure (meaning), the reverse is also true. In order to get from internal meaning to a written form which coherently communicates meaning to a reader, one needs a good command of syntax.

This would not necessarily mean, however, that all reading instruction must come before all writing instruction. There are currently many teachers and researchers who are exploring ways in which the processes of reading and writing can be combined in the classroom to complement and reinforce one another. (See, for example, the articles by Sternglass, Falk, and Flynn.) What this does suggest is that the remedial reader/writer who is in a writing class where nothing is being done to improve his reading skills is not likely to be able to improve his writing skills much either.

What are some of the implications of recent research in reading and writing for the teacher of remedial writing students?

Much of the recent research would seem to suggest, at least indirectly, some sort of link between reading and writing deficiencies. Thus it would be useful for writing teachers to know more about testing of reading, about reading theory generally, and about ways to integrate reading and writing in the classroom.

While it may be neither necessary nor desirable to test all incoming students for reading, it might be helpful to have diagnostic reading tests available for those students about whose reading ability some doubt exists. Of course, testing is of little use unless there is some help available in the form of a reading lab or some other place or program which will help students improve their reading skills. It would probably be wise, though, to ensure that it is the kind of program which stresses reading for meaning and which uses materials of interest to (preferably chosen by) the students rather than consisting of the sort of word drills which may be part of the cause of the student's present problem. (See Frank Smith, Psycholinguistics and Reading and Understanding Reading for theoretical information which would help in setting up a positive reading program.) At any rate, any teacher who suspects that lack of reading proficiency may be part of a particular student's problem (and certainly any remedial writing teacher) should have access to reading tests and enough understanding of psycholinguistic theory to either refer a student to a reading lab for help or make room within the writing program for reading instruction.

Fortunately, much research is currently being done on integrating reading and writing processes in the classroom. Though much of it is concerned with students who are not remedial and with types of literary analysis which may be too sophisticated for remedial students, it would seem that many discoveries about how to combine reading and writing would also be useful to teachers of remedial students.

It would likely be advantageous for teachers to have more information about some of the theory related to differences between spoken and written language, the spoken language of the educated vs. the uneducated speaker, and the differences between reading and writing. Without the theoretical background it would not seem possible to really know what to do or how to do it. In other words, a "methods" course without the theoretical background would not be of much use, and with the theoretical background might not be necessary.

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Although in this paper I have focused on ways in which reading deficiencies may interfere with progress in writing, it is important not to see this as the only problem of remedial students. It is essential that we be aware of other, more personal factors common to many remedial students which must also be taken into consideration in setting up a remedial writing program. In relation to implications for teaching it seems important to mention the necessity for setting up classroom programs and evaluative techniques that encourage rather than discourage the student whose primary perception of himself is as a "failure" (at least in an academic setting). We need to recognize the value of those tasks at which he is already capable

of being successful (such as personal narration or expressive writing) and help him to extend that success gradually to more other-centered forms of writing. We also need to help him to overcome his fear of error and to learn to see it (as professional writers see it) as a learning device, a way of discovering meaning. Further, we need to develop evaluative procedures which will allow a student to measure progress on the yardstick of his own attempts rather than against someone else's arbitrary set of standards.

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